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SUBJECT: MOD BRIEF ON NEW DRAFT PLAN FOR REMOVAL OF OBSTACLES TO MOVEMENT

Classified By: Ambassador Richard H. Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (S) Summary and comment: The MOD's new draft plan has replaced the removal of checkpoints with the concept of "normally open checkpoints" and bypass roads. This is a step backwards from their original proposal, which concentrated on removing checkpoints. There are, nonetheless, some bright spots. The plan allows, for example, for continuing bilateral discussions to remove obstacles to movement. There are also signs of some willingness to at least partially address our concerns on movement in the Jordan Valley. Overall, however, the plan reflects the heavily weighted calculus of the present security environment and the IDF's primary goals in the West Bank of protecting settlers and preventing terrorism. We have also seen a general reluctance of the GOI political echelon to engage in our discussions or push the process beyond the limited security concerns of the MOD/IDF. This situation, unfortunately, is likely to continue in light of the fragility of the post-Sharon political environment. While the new draft plan will not likely have an immediate impact on improving the lives of Palestinians, as envisioned in the November 15 Agreement on Movement and Access, establishing a mechanism for further discussion and evaluation could lead to improvements in the longer term. These discussions, as agreed to by the MOD, would include DAO contact with local IDF commanders on the ground, continuing joint evaluation of the plan's implementation, loosening of restrictions on village clusters and the permit regime, improving the key Wadi Nar checkpoint and opening some access to the Jordan Valley. Notwithstanding these discussions, we believe it is necessary to continue to set down a marker with the GOI that any plan they pursue must show a significant impact on the movement of Palestinian people and goods, that Palestinians must have free access to the West Bank road system, and that the building of bypass roads and flyovers to avoid obstacles to travel are no substitute for removing those obstacles. We recommend that Assistant Secretary Welch raise this issue during his next visit. End summary and comment.

2. (S) Brigadier General Moshe "Chico" Tamir, chief of staff of the IDF's Central Command, on January 5 presented the outlines of the IDF's draft plan for movement in the West Bank for Palestinians. The plan de-emphasizes removal of checkpoints, and focuses instead on the use of bypass roads and "normally open checkpoints" as alternatives for Palestinians. Tamir began the meeting by explaining that the GOI faces the problem of defending Israeli settlers and preventing continued terror attacks in Israel emanating from the West Bank, particularly the northern West Bank, while trying to allow the Palestinians to move as freely as possible. He said that one solution was for the GOI to build fences around settlements and give them protective equipment. In addition, according to Tamir, while the separation barrier has been one solution to stopping attacks in Israel, Jerusalem has proven a weak link because there are approximately 130,000-170,000 Palestinians who cross into the city from the West Bank each day, who gain access into Israel. He also noted that GOI assumptions that disengagement in the northern West Bank would bring some quiet as local Palestinian police took control of security have not proven true. He said that terrorist cells, especially the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) in Jenin, have filled the void and are "working very hard," and that Hamas is only "waiting for the day after" to begin launching attacks.

3. (S) As a result of this security environment, according to Tamir, the new draft plan allows Palestinians and settlers to move within the West Bank on separate roads, and to "avoid checkpoints, but not remove them." In order to separate the Palestinians and settlers, he said, the IDF has "disconnected" Palestinian villages from main roads that settlers use with earthmounds, and allowed Palestinians to reach other villages through bypass roads, which are usually in worse condition and smaller than the main roads. If Palestinians use major roads, they must go through checkpoints, sometimes more than once, he commented. The plan, therefore, is to improve movement by upgrading the bypass roads Palestinians use, and by building overpasses and underpasses on the main roads so that Palestinians can avoid the checkpoints. Tamir used a road between Bir Nabala and Ramallah, and from Tulkarm to Qalqilya, as examples of current upgrade projects, as well as underpasses for Palestinians under the protected Rt. 443, which would begin

in Phase One.

14. (S) Tamir said that the IDF would still be willing to remove approximately 12 of the obstacles it listed in its original plan by January 15, and open Nablus and remove back-to-back in a second phase, but opined that "speaking of numbers is a mistake." He commented that division commanders have almost independent authority in local areas, and that he as the chief of staff did not necessarily know where all checkpoints were located at any given time. He mentioned, however, that the GOI understands that Palestinian economic improvement and more access to education is "better for us," and said that this plan would allow that to take place in the long-term. "Our suggestion is to give them different road options," he concluded. In response to a question from the DCM, Tamir acknowledged that there is no dramatic improvement for Palestinians in the short-term, and reverted back to discussing various security threats, such as weapons smuggling in vegetable trucks and a recently found explosive lab in Nablus, as reasons why the GOI could not remove a significant number of roadblocks.

15. (S) In response to a question from EconCouns, Brigadier General (ret.) Baruch Spiegel, Ministry of Defense advisor, replied that the Jordan Valley and Rt. 90 remain a "big policy decision," but that the GOI is willing to be more flexible with permits. He said that Israel would look at opening east-west routes to the Jordan Valley, but said that north-south travel on Rt. 90 itself was difficult because of the need to protect Israeli civilian traffic on the road. Spiegel added that Palestinians will be able to avoid the Shavei Shomrom checkpoint with an overpass, and asked that the USG be patient for 1-2 months on opening up the Nablus area while the IDF finishes a "major operation" there. He also asked for USAID help in upgrading some of the roads that the IDF has in mind, but did not specify which ones. Spiegel commented that once the separation barrier is complete, the IDF will fully evaluate every obstacle to movement, and will remove the ones that are not needed. He said that the IDF will have more details on its plan next week, and will take it "to the top" by January 15. EconCouns told Spiegel and Tamir that the USG could not comment on the plan until it receives more details and a written document from the GOI on its exact intentions.

16. (S) In a separate meeting, Spiegel told the Ambassador that the plan would result in Palestinians being able to use 80 percent of the roads in the West Bank. (Comment: As Tamir said, these roads are in worse condition and smaller than major roads. DAO reports have noted that the roads could be upgraded, but at significant expense, and that in some cases their use would still impose unnecessary hardships on Palestinians. End comment). According to Spiegel, Palestinians would have the option of using major roads as well, but would have to go through checkpoints. He also noted that in the second phase of the plan, Nablus checkpoints would be changed from closed to "normally open" and that back-to-back checks of trucks entering and exiting the city would end. He described the "normally open" checkpoints in Nablus as well as Tappuah Junction as ones which would be manned but would remain open unless a specific security threat emerges. Spiegel emphasized that the real progress would come from talks between the Embassy's DAO and the IDF on improving the functioning of checkpoints. He also said that USAID's involvement in road upgrade projects and the OCHA's village clusters analysis would be further topics for discussion.

17. (S) Comment: While sympathetic with the IDF's desire for a system that can respond to fluctuations in security conditions while providing protection for Israeli citizens, we believe that the current proposal does not meet the objectives the GOI agreed to in the November 15 Agreement on Movement and Access. Notwithstanding these discussions, we believe it is necessary to continue to set down a marker with the GOI that any plan they pursue must show a significant impact on the movement of Palestinian people and goods, that Palestinians must have free access to the West Bank road system, and that the building of bypass roads and flyovers to avoid obstacles to travel are no substitute for removing those obstacles. We recommend that Assistant Secretary Welch raise this issue during his next visit. End comment.

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